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ABSTRACT

Project Success is a vocational education program designed to help at-risk 9th and 10th grade students improve their chances for completing high school and obtaining employment implemented at Bainbridge High School in Georgia. Prospective students are economically disadvantaged, scored below the 25th percentile on a standardized test, received a grade of "D" or below in a vocational class, and need support services. The program focuses on a combination of competencies for occupational entry, adjustment, and advancement in a vocational field and on remediating individual deficiencies in reading, language, and mathematics. The program addresses life adjustment and career seeking skills, positive study skills, psychological and social needs, and vocational interests. Students work with their teachers to prepare a resume, complete job applications, practice being interviewed for a job, and learn how to maintain and keep a job. An evaluation of the program looked at test achievement, attendance, program holding power, and student performance; and used pretest and posttest results and teacher records. These measures showed that the first year of the program saw a significant improvement in the students. In the second year, an even greater improvement in attendance, grades, attitude, and test scores was found. In addition, program effectiveness was thought to depend on the teacher's competence. Includes 11 tables. (JB)

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They're Still in School: Results of an Intervention Program for At-risk High School Students

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They're Still in School: Results of an Intervention Program for At-risk High School Students

Introduction

Faced with soaring dropout rates and cries for reform from a variety of educational and political camps, educators are armed with new or resurrected buzzwords for the nineties. Such terms as "alternative schools," "empowerment," "coordinated service delivery," and "whole language," do reflect tremendous efforts on the part of educators to meet the seemingly interminable list of needs of public school children. "At-risk," although becoming dangerously close to being another buzzword, reflects the ever-increasing pressure on schools to address the discouragingly broad range of social and emotional needs which are going unmet for far too many students.

Students who are at risk of poor school performance or of dropping out before the completion of high school are the focus of much educational literature and research. Efforts to address the needs of these students, and in some cases, their families, reflect the wide range of definitions and opinions on the appropriate intervention points and tactics for these students. One such effort is Project Success, a vocational education program designed to help at-risk ninth and tenth grade students improve their chances for completing high school and obtaining gainful and consistent employment. The purpose of this paper is to describe the Project Success program and to present the results of evaluation of the degree to which the program objectives were met for the 1990-1991 and 1991-1992 academic years.

Target Group

Project Success is designed for ninth and tenth grade students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Prospective students have scored below the 25th percentile on a standardized test (e.g., ITBS, BST, CRT), have received a grade of "D" or below in a vocational class and need support services to succeed in that class, and are two grade levels below chronological peers in reading, English, or math skills. In addition, target students are economically disadvantaged as identified on the basis of eligibility for free or reduced lunch and have chronic deportment and absentee problems. Most importantly, these students are seen by their teachers as being capable of succeeding in school, but they have voiced little interest in continuing their education. Teachers having worked with these students often describe them as having low motivation and poor self esteem.

Students may be referred to the Success Program through several different means. Referrals include teacher, counselor or administrator recommendation, parent request, or referral by other Project Success students. Referrals might also be obtained through the juvenile justice system (e.g., probation office, truant office), Department of Family and Children Services, or grade failure or Basic Skills Test results lists. Student participation is voluntary.

Needs Addressed

The Success curriculum focuses on a combination of competencies necessary for occupational entry, adjustment and advancement in a vocational education field. Special emphasis is placed on remediating individual deficiencies in reading, language, and math. These deficiencies are seen as impeding the student's progress in regular and vocational education classrooms. In addition, life adjustment and career seeking skills are addressed in the program.

Project Success provides an atmosphere where students can experience success instead of failure, with which they are generally quite familiar. All students are members of the Vocational Opportunities Clubs of Americas (VOCA), through which they can begin to enjoy successful school experiences which have eluded them for far too long. The organization allows students to gain experience in group dynamics, leadership, citizenship, and vocational skill development. This skill development is most noticeable in student participation in regional and state skill competitions.

Much emphasis in the Success Program is placed on developing positive study skills. Students are given assistance in developing skills for specific disciplines, learning to work positively with different teachers with different teaching styles, and learning to take responsibility for their own education.

Psychological and social needs are met by the use of consistent positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior and improved class work. Much discussion, class work, and counseling in the Success class are used to encourage students to develop positive attitudes toward work, school, home, and life.

Employment needs are addressed in a multi-faceted approach. Students complete a vocational assessment test to identify their vocational strengths, and they complete an interest inventory to identify their career interests. The students then study all phases of employability skills, develop a career research manual, and begin the process of searching for employment, if they so choose. Students work closely with their Success teachers in preparation of a resume, completion of job applications, techniques of a good job interview, and maintaining and keeping a good job.

Through the recommendation of the Decatur County Board of Education, Bainbridge High School applied for a Georgia Department of Education vocational grant for Project Success. Having obtained the grant and designated the Project Success teacher who met the certification requirements, the project coordinator (i.e., Success Teacher) completed a six-week training course conducted by the State Department of Education. In addition, Project Success teachers and the Success classroom paraprofessional received one to two weeks of training.

The Success team of teachers consists of one math teacher, one English teacher, four vocational teachers, and one paraprofessional who is assigned to the Project Success class. Each class (maximum of 20/class) follows a blocked schedule for English, math, a designated vocational class, and the Project Success class. For their remaining classes, the students are mainstreamed into science, history, physical education, and electives.

As mentioned above, Project Success activities are designed to meet a wide variety of academic, vocational, social and emotional needs of the students. In addition to the needs addressed through the Success class, the vocational classes, and the academic classes, many of the students' needs are met through the mentoring and employment preparation and participation activities. The success of these two activities is due to the strong community support developed through continuous dissemination of project activities through such media as the local newspaper, service club presentations, and business community partnerships.

In order to achieve the broad purpose of the program, the following objectives were developed for Project Success by the State Department of Education:

1. Improve the probability of passing the Georgia Basic Skills Test;
2. Improve attendance;

3. Retain 85%-90% of the students in the program throughout the year;

4. Improve student performance.

Evaluation Design

In order to obtain data to address the objectives of Project Success, a basic single group, pretest-posttest design was used. The single group design was used because of the difficulty of obtaining a comparable comparison group. Data relevant to the program objectives were generally available on program participants prior to their entry into the program and upon completion of the first year of the program. Because of the level of specificity of the project objectives, quantitative data were most appropriate to address the objectives. Informal class interviews, teacher and administrator discussions, and student writing are sources of qualitative data which provide another view of the programs level of success which goes beyond the four objectives. (See Chart A for data collection schedule.)

Objective 1. Improve the probability of passing the Georgia Basic Skills Test.

The Georgia Basic Skills Test is given to 10th grade students and passing of all three components of the test is required for a high school diploma. This criterion referenced test has sections on Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. Minimum passing score is 307 for Reading, 313 for Writing, and 308 for Math.

Objective 2. Improve attendance.

Attendance records are maintained by the Success teacher and by the high school principal's office. In addition to full day attendance records, records on in school suspensions (ISS), out of school suspensions (OSS), number of times students have checked themselves into school late and number of time they have checked out of school early, and number of detention

halls per year are used a further indication of the degree of attendance of the students. Data in these areas are compared between the 1989-1990 and 1990-1991 academic years.

Objective 3. Retain 85%-90% of the students in the program throughout the year

The definition of program dropout is a student who left the Success program but completed the school year in another school setting. A school dropout is defined as a Project Success student who left the program and did not attend any school for the remainder of the academic year.

Objective 4. Improve student performance.

Student performance measures include academic grade averages, total grade averages, and semester for the 1989-1990 and 1990-1991 academic years. (Because student performance is generally enhanced through participation in extracurricular activities, student presentation is school clubs, athletics, band and similar extra-curricular activities, along with employment participation data, are available for review by the validation team.)

Another measure of student performance is the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). This test was administered to program participants in September 1990 and again in April 1991. The TABE is a norm-referenced test which is machine scored at the district office. Grade equivalent scores were utilized for the Project Success comparisons because of their ease of interpretation. According to the technical manual for the TABE, "Grade equivalents are based upon the California Achievement Test (E and F) standardization administrations in October (.1) and May (.8). Grade equivalents for other times of the school year are interpolated from these points."

Chart A. Record of Data Collection and Analysis

Objective	Evaluation Instruments	Subjects	Data Collection Date	Data Analysis	Results
1. Improve probability of passing the BST	Georgia Basic Skills Test	Success Students and Chapter I Students	Sp. 1991 Sp. 1992	Desc. Stats.	Success Students' Pass Rate: reading - 88%; math - 78%; writing - 93%
2. Improve attendance	Office records	Success Students	1989-1992	Desc. Stats.; t-tests	Reduction from an avg. of 11.25 to 6.62 absences
3. 85%-90% program retention	Student records	Success Students	1990-1992	Desc. Stats.	81%-93% retention rates
4. Improve student performance	TABE Course grades	Success Students	1989-1991	Desc. Stats.; t-tests	Significant gains in math and reading

Results and Analysis

1. **Objective 1. Improve the probability of passing the Georgia Basic Skills Exam.**

Table 1 lists the BST results for the 1990-1991 Success students as compared with students in Chapter I during the same year. These two sets of students had a comparable success rate on the BST for 1991. The Chapter I students outperformed the Success students by only 6 percentage points in writing and reading, while both groups passed at a rate of a little more than 70% on the math section of the test. The 1992 test data show that the Success students had improved considerably to a pass rate of 88% for reading, 78% for math, and 93% for writing. (No 1992 results were available for the Chapter I students.)

Table 1. Basic Skills Test Passing Rates: Success and Chapter I, 1990-1991; 1992

	Number of Chapter I Students Passing (1991)	Number of Success Students Passing (1991)	Number of Success Students Passing by 1992
Reading	82 (92%)	50 (80%)	51 (88%)
Math	70 (71%)	42 (72%)	45 (78%)
Writing	82 (91%)	49 (86%)	53 (93%)

It is important to note that the Chapter I students have a reading specialist who teaches a reading class for all Chapter I students. Reading remediation for the Success students is available only through assistance in the Success class.

Objective 2. Improve Attendance

Data comparing the attendance and discipline data for 1989-1990 and 1990-1991 academic years for Success students are presented in Table 2. Data are presented only for those students who did not have more than five consecutive absences due to illness or injury during either the 1989-1990 or 1990-1991 academic year. Those students who did have a large number of ISS, OSS, or discipline referrals, however, are included in the data.

Table 2. Success Students Attendance and Discipline Referral Data, 1989-1991 (n = 39)

Item	1989-1990 Mean	1990-1991 Mean	Diff.	t-value (df)	p-value
Absences	7.63	4.71	-2.92	-2.08	.044
Check-in	0	1.28	1.28	3.10	.004
Check-out	.26	.97	.97	1.97	.056
Detention Hall	.05	.10	.05	.70	.487
ISS	1.0	1.31	.31	.50	.621
OSS	.38	1.08	.70	1.74	.09

The statistically significant ($p < .05$) decrease in the average number of absences of the Success students reflects the ability of the program to keep students in school. Check-in and check-out data, although they appear to worsen slightly over the two year period, reflect the conscious effort of the students to assume the responsibility for their own attendance. It is highly probable that the Success students had no check-ins prior to entering the program because if they were going to be late to school, they would never bother to attend at all. Similarly, check-out data show an increase over the two year period, possibly reflecting the increased sense

of responsibility for attendance and making the effort to stay within the attendance guidelines of the Success Program.

Data for detention hall, ISS, and OSS all increased slightly from 1989-1990 to 1990-1991. This increase might be a reflection of a change in discipline policy. For the 1990-1991 year, if a student had a detention but did not attend, an OSS was automatically assigned. In addition, students who had four unexcused tardies were assigned detention. Additional tardies could result in another detention being assigned. It appears that many of the Success students, while they did have unexcused tardies, may have missed detention and thus been assigned OSS due to transportation problems. This may also be the case of other students, but the Success students were generally not guilty of major and flagrant violations of school rules (e.g., fighting).

Total absentee data for all 61 students in the Success Program from 1989-1992 are presented in Table 3. Discipline referral data are presented in Table 4 for the same years. Both sets of data reveal a dramatic decrease in absences and discipline referrals from 1989-1991 to 1991-1992.

Table 3. Project Success Student Absentee Data - All Students; 1989-1991

n=61	**Number of Days Absent 1989-1990**	**Number of Days Absent 1990-1991**
9th Grade	380	194
10th Grade	306	210
Total	686	404
Average	11.25	6.62

Table 4. Project Success Discipline Referrals - All Students; 1989-1991

1989-1990 Discipline Referrals	1990-1991 Discipline Referrals
92 (Mean = 1.51)	47 (Mean = .77)

(n=61)

Objective 3. Retain 85%-90% of students in the program throughout the year.

Total retention figures show that 93% students completed the Success Program for 1990-1991, and 87% completed for 1991-1992 (Table 5). Of the original 74 students who entered the program in 1990, 81% completed the program in the 1991-1992 academic year.

Table 5. Project Success Program Completion Rate

Status	1990-1991 Success Students	1991-1992 Success Students	Two-Year Completion Rate
Dropouts	5	9	
Completers	69	60	
Completion Rate	93%	87%	81% (60 of the original 1990-1991 class)

Objective 4 - Improve Student Performance

Results of the t-tests comparing the Fall 1990 test scores with the Spring 1991 test scores show that the Project Success students performed statistically significantly better on the math and writing sections of the TABE (Table 6). Although these performances are all below grade level,

they show at least approximately a five month gain from late September to early April, a period of about six months. While comparison data are not available, this rate of improvement could be viewed as important, especially given these students' histories of academic problems.

Table 6. Results of TABE - Fall 1990 vs. Spring 1991 (n = 48)

TABE	Fall 1990	Spring 1991	Diff.	t-value (df=47)	Prob.
Math	7.74	8.22	.48	-2.57	.013
Writing	6.64	7.13	.49	-1.92	.061
Reading	6.66	7.75	1.09	-5.84	.0001

Further evidence of the success of these students can be seen in their statistically significant improvement in their academic and total averages from 1989-1990 to 1990-1991. As can be seen in Table 7, Project Success students improved their academic grades by an average of 3.29 points and their total averages an average of 3.72 points. (Specific course averages for 1990-1991 are presented in Table 8.)

Table 7. Academic and Total Averages - 1989-1990 vs. 1990-1991

Averages	1989-1990	1990-1991	Diff.	t-value (df)	Prob.
Academic	78.17	81.46	3.29	-2.37 (44)	.022
Total	79.97	83.69	3.72	-3.37 (47)	.001

Table 8. Semester Course Averages for 1990-1991

	1990-1991 Semester 1	1990-1991 Semester 2
English	79.94	76.04
Math	88.90	89.04
History	79.49	79.00
Success	89.41	87.16
Science	78.48	73.97

Further evidence of the academic success of Project Success students can be seen in a comparison between the number of courses attempted and passed in 1989-1990 vs. 1990-1991. As shown in Table 9, Success students passed 82% of the total number of courses attempted in 1989-1990, but this figure had risen to 92% for 1990-1991.

Table 9. Course Pass Rate - 1989-1990 vs. 1990-1991

	1989-1990	1990-1991
Courses Passed	567 (82%)	640 (91%)
Courses Failed	122 (12%)	62 (9%)

Secondary Analysis of Discipline, Absences, and Grade Data

School attendance and acceptable behavior are generally viewed as critical for academic success, especially for students who are at risk of dropping out of school. In order to explore this relationship for the Project Success students, their attendance, discipline, and grades data

were correlated (Pearson Product Moment Correlation). Data were analyzed for the 40 students who did not have more than five consecutive absences due to illness or injury during either the 1989-1990 or 1990-1991 academic year.

For the purpose of this analysis, ISS, OSS, and detention hall data for each student were totaled to create an indicator of overall discipline problems, regardless of the reason. This new variable is listed in the data presentation as "Discipline." In addition, the discipline variable was added to the number of absences, divided by 2 and multiplied by 100 to yield a "Discipline Index." This index was developed for exploration of the combined impact of discipline and absences as they relate to academic success (i.e., grades).

The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 10. For both years, the number of absences, discipline (OSS + ISS + detention hall) and the discipline index were each negatively correlated with academic and total grade averages. Significant correlations ($p < .05$) were found for absences with academic average and for the discipline index with both academic average and total average for 1989-1990. For 1990-1991, discipline was significantly correlated with academic average. These stronger and statistically significant correlations are especially noteworthy because of the critical importance of academic courses in the progress of students through high school (i.e., obtaining credits). It also supports the efforts of the Project Success teachers in addressing the discipline referrals and absences of students as one way to improve academic performance.

Table 10. Correlations for Discipline, Absences, and Discipline Index with Grades

	1989-1990 Academic Average	1989-1990 Total Average	1990-1991 Academic Average	1990-1991 Total Average
Discipline	r = -.20 p = .23	r = -.30 p = .06	r = -.32 p = .04*	r = -.28 p = .08
Absences	r = -.45 p = .006*	r = -.25 p = .12	r = -.15 p = .35	r = -.17 p = .29
Discipline Index	r = -.50 p = .002*	r = -.34 p = .032*	r = -.25 p = .12	r = -.25 p = .12

* $p < .05$

Teacher Profile

The effectiveness of school programs is clearly a function of teacher competence. Because of the intense and continuous contact that Project Success teachers have with their students and the strong progress that the Success students have made in improving their school lives, a profile of the qualities which a Success teacher should possess was developed (see Table 11). The skills and qualities listed in this profile were obtained through interviews with the Project Success and was corroborated by Success students in their interviews with the validation team.

Table 11. Essential Skills and Qualities for a Project Success Teacher

Counseling Skills
Experience/Mature
Aware of the Problems of Teaching in a Vocational Area
Creative
Can Influence Staff Development
Can Motivate Students;
Move Them From Being Extrinsically Motivated
to Being Intrinsically Motivated
Can Work Comfortably Students and Parents
with a Wide Range of Socio-economic Backgrounds
Tireless
Caring
Doesn't "Sweat the Details"
Willing to Challenge the Traditional Mode of Doing Things
Can Serve as an Advocate for the Students
Willing to Face Failure
Flexible
Has a Sense of Humor

Educational Significance:

The significance of how widespread the problem in Bainbridge High School is can best be shown by the number of teacher referrals made to Project Success. Out of the 9th and 10th grade students, 165 names were referred to the project for placement into the program - only 80 can be served. This referral list did not include upcoming 9th graders.

A member of the guidance department best stated the importance of this program by saying, "If it were not for Project Success, most of the participants would be failing their classes or have become high school dropouts". This program makes a significant change in the students attitude, grades, discipline and attendance.

Any school which chooses to implement Project Success would benefit by seeing students who did not want to be at school actually demonstrate a real desire to come to school and participate in classes as well as extra curricula activities. One student stated, "It seems like the school year just began and it is now over. For the first time I have enjoyed coming to school. School is fun and I'm making much better grades." As one parent stated, "I'm not completely sure what you are doing, but whatever it is, don't quit." One parent paid the project the highest compliment by saying, "Every student in the school should have to be involved in Project Success. It has made the difference in my child graduating or not."

The first year of the program made a significant improvement in the students. The second year has seen an even greater improvement in the student's attendance, grade improvement, attitude change and TABE test scores.

Special Problems

No interrvention program is immune from problems, and Project Success did have its share. Listed below are the main problems whihc the Project Success staff identified as hindering program effectiveness.

a. Reading specialist is needed. Standardized test scores reflect the low reading abilities of the Success students. Reading support services are not provided in the regular classroom, so students need additional assistance in the Success class to help compensate for their reading deficiencies.

b. Need for the addition of a CVAE program in the 11th and 12th grades. Preliminary evidence shows that students exiting the Success Program need continued academic, vocational, social, and emotional support in order to continue the progress they realized while in the Success Program.

c. Need access to a hands-on workshop for academic teachers. The support of regular academic teachers has been excellent, but greater understanding of the special needs of the Success students could help the regular classroom teacher meet these needs.

d. Need two para-professionals for remediation services in the Success class.

Conclusion

Keeping at risk students in school and providing them with the academic and vocation opportunities to succeed have been shown through Project Success to be effective. Increases in academic success, self esteem and motivation, along with reductions in absenteeism and discipline problems can increase the probability of a student's graduating from high school and

being successful in a chosen vocational area after graduation. The literature on intervention programs with at risk students shows quite clearly that significant savings in human and monetary capital are realized through programs such as Project Success. The results of Project Success certainly support this literature, especially in light of the fact that students in the program who would be expected to have a dropout rate of between 50% and 90% (based on the number of years that they were retained) are completing the program and remaining in school at a rate of between 81% and 93%.